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978-0-521-67267-2 - The Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party, 1916-1923

Michael Laffan

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THE RESURRECTION OF IRELAND

Between 1916 and 1923 Ireland experienced a political as well as a military revolution. This book examines how, after the Easter rising of 1916, radical revolutionaries formed a precarious coalition with (relatively) moderate politicians, offering a sustained analysis of the political organisation of Irish republicanism during a crucial period. The new Sinn Féin party routed its enemies, co-operated uneasily with the underground Irish government which it had helped to create, and achieved most of its objectives before disintegrating in 1922. Its rapid collapse should not distract from its achievements – in particular its role in ‘democratising’ the Irish revolution. Its successors have dominated the political life of independent Ireland. The book studies in some detail the party’s membership and ideology, and also its often tense relationship with the Irish Republican Army. A final chapter examines the fluctuating careers of the later Sinn Féin parties throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

MICHAEL LAFFAN is a member of the School of History at University College, Dublin. His previous publications include *The Partition of Ireland, 1911–1925* (1983) and, as editor, *The Burden of German History 1919–1945* (1988).

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To my nephews,
ROBERT, JACK AND BILL

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

By a happy coincidence the hardcover edition of this book was published on 2 December 1999. It was the day when the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998 came into effect. It was the day when the Republic of Ireland amended its constitution and abandoned its unqualified claim to the territory of Northern Ireland, replacing this claim with a recognition that 'a United Ireland shall be brought about only by peaceful means with the consent of a majority of the people, democratically expressed, in both jurisdictions in the island'. And it was the day when the present Sinn Féin party accepted the realities of modern Irish life. Its representatives joined unionists and moderate nationalists as members of a new power-sharing Northern Irish executive, a body which operated under the authority of Westminster. Thereby they finally relinquished a policy that had been outlined 95 years earlier by Arthur Griffith and which had characterized all the various Sinn Féin parties since then: the refusal to recognize Britain's role in Ireland, or to participate in parliaments and governments of which they disapproved.

The paperback edition of the book is published at the end of 2005, which has been celebrated in different ways by different groups as the centenary year of Sinn Féin. Its appearance or reappearance provides an occasion for reflection on what has, and what has not, occurred during the six years' interval to the party that currently uses the name.

When the IRA's cease-fire was followed by Sinn Féin's abandonment of its abstention policy it seemed possible that Northern Ireland might grope its way towards a more normal civic and political culture. The unwillingness of organized unionism to accept nationalists as equal citizens – the ultimate cause of the Northern 'troubles' – had long been overcome, at least at the level of structures and institutions. Many people hoped that old, traditional patterns of hatred and violence might slowly fade away.

In some respects the optimism of the Good Friday Agreement has been vindicated. Although Northern Ireland remains a polarized society which is characterized by sectarianism, murder, intimidation and robbery, there has not

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been a return to the scale of killing that marked the period from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s. Although both the nationalist and the unionist communities have drifted away from the middle ground and have embraced extremist parties, Sinn Féin remains a political organization with an active membership and an increasing number of voters. The vast majority of republicans have tried to achieve their objectives by non-violent means.

One central feature of the Good Friday agreement was the commitment of nationalists and unionists to sharing power in Belfast, but a combination of provocation, inflexibility and distrust has made it difficult or impossible to achieve this aim.

The IRA failed in its long and bloody campaign to drive the British out of Northern Ireland and to force its unionist population into a united Irish Republic. Between 1966 and 1999 republicans were responsible for almost 60% of the violent deaths in Northern Ireland, nearly six times the total killed by all security forces, and yet by the end of that period they had achieved nothing that was not available at Sunningdale a quarter-century earlier. Their own actions in the late twentieth century made Irish unity even less likely than before.

But unionists have not been satisfied with this substantial victory. They also demanded a symbolic surrender by the IRA, an emphasis or a priority which indicates that many of them valued the prospect of ritual triumph more highly than the quiet consolidation of peace. Echoes of ‘Croppies lie down!’ could still be heard, sometimes loudly and clearly. Many people regarded this unionist demand as excessive; apart from the IRA’s other reasons for remaining intact and armed, to ‘decommission’ its weapons and to disband its units at the insistence of its enemies would expose the futility of its long and bloody campaign.

The IRA had other powerful reasons for postponing any return to civilian normality: it had metamorphosed into a highly successful criminal organization which controlled parts of Northern Ireland, and even a few areas in the Republic, as its own ‘state within a state’. Membership of the IRA has often been associated with loot.

As a counterpart to the unionists’ triumphalism, Sinn Féin has refused to become an ‘ordinary’ political party. It has chosen (or felt obliged) to remain intimately linked with a private army, or militia, or mafia. Its conversion to democracy has been incomplete.

Despite or because of its refusal to break fully with its past Sinn Féin has enjoyed spectacular success in the years since the Good Friday Agreement. The party’s progress has been particularly evident in Northern Ireland, although it can also be seen to a lesser extent in the Republic. Sinn Féin has supplanted the Social Democratic and Labour Party to become the main representative of

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Northern nationalists, and in stages over several elections its percentage of votes and seats has increased steadily at the expense of its rival. In 2005, the party's so-called 'centenary year', it was able to win five Westminster seats to the SDLP's three.

In the Republic Sinn Féin's growth has been less rapid but – considering that it had for so long been regarded as a 'Northern' party – its advance has perhaps been even more remarkable. In the two general elections that spanned the Good Friday Agreement its share of the first preference vote rose from 2.5% to 6.5%. Its support soon increased further. In part this was because Sinn Féin has been seen as a protest party, unaffected by the numerous scandals which have tainted the public life of the state. In some areas it also benefited from the local popularity of the IRA's vigilante activities. Its paramilitary wing or ally has used brutal and thuggish measures to combat certain drug-dealers and other criminal elements while simultaneously persisting in its own habits of robbery, smuggling, assaults on opponents or rivals, and occasional murders. It has run with the hare and hunted with the hounds.

The party's president, Gerry Adams, became a popular figure who has been invited to meetings in the White House and fêted at gatherings around the world. His intimate connection with the Provisional IRA, and also his widely alleged central role in its past and present actions, has been denied, endorsed or forgiven by large numbers of Irish voters.

Sinn Féin developed into an authoritarian, well-organized and electorally successful party containing many committed and hard-working members. It also became rich. Its money has come from various sources, and until the United States became a victim of terrorist attacks in September 2001 Irish-Americans were prominent among its benefactors. Such supporters associated it either with anti-British and anti-unionist attitudes which they shared, or – among the more gullible – with a struggle against oppression and imperialism which they imagined the party to represent. The more that Sinn Féin was abused by Ulster unionists the more confident such people became that its heart must be in the right place. Another source of the party's funding is believed to have been proceeds from protection money and from bank raids carried out by its members or allies who belonged to the IRA.

Some people have hoped that Sinn Féin will complete what they see as its natural trajectory towards political normality, and that sooner or later it will form part of a coalition government in Dublin. In this way it would follow the precedents established from 1922 onwards by politicized radicals such as Collins, de Valera and MacBride. But for many others it continued to be a threat to democracy and it has remained too close to a private army that had much innocent blood on its hands.

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One of Sinn Féin's principal objectives has been to avoid either a breach with the IRA or a further split within the republican army's ranks; Adams has been anxious to avoid Collins's fate. Over many years Irish and British governments have courted and rewarded the party because it could portray itself as the one group able to influence the 'wild men' and persuade them to desist from killing. It has probably benefited more from the peace process than it would have done from the attainment of a genuine peace, of a normal society freed from organized intimidation, maiming and murder.

The party's successes have been particularly remarkable because Sinn Féin was obliged by circumstances – above all by the IRA's failure to achieve its objectives – to abandon much of its traditional programme and to steal the clothes of its moderate nationalist rivals. It has been forced, reluctantly, to admit that the Republic of Ireland is a separate, sovereign state. It has accepted that the British will not allow themselves to be driven out of Northern Ireland, and that Irish unity will not take place without majority support among the Northern electorate. It has been compelled to recognize unionists as a separate community that defends its own interests, rather than as blind tools of British imperialism.

The party has participated in the democratic process that it used to disparage, while simultaneously flaunting its links with IRA robbers and killers. Its ability to employ these separate tactics provoked dismay in some quarters, but also wry or fulsome admiration in others. The scale of IRA violence can fluctuate in elegant harmony with the electoral cycle, and intimidation that might alienate floating voters has tended to diminish as polling days drew closer. On occasion – notably in early 2005 at the beginning of the party's 'centenary year' – its links to brutal murder and to spectacular theft resulted in embarrassment and ignominy. Yet for many years its overlap with the IRA has been too close and deep (and in some respects also too valuable, and too dangerous to relinquish) for the party to abandon its connection with a paramilitary force which is associated with sectarianism and crime.

In July 2005 the IRA announced that it would end its armed campaign, and its units were ordered to dump their weapons. Members were directed that in future they should work 'through exclusively political means'. But the IRA itself would continue to exist, and few observers expected it to abandon its highly profitable illegal activities – or to sever the complex links that connected it to 'political' republicanism. The relationship between the party and the army would be altered once more, but it would not end.

2005 marks the centenary of the foundation of the first Sinn Féin party. In terms of objectives, culture and personnel there is little in common between Arthur Griffith's small group, which was committed to the achievement of a dual monarchy by political means, and the fifth party of that name, which is

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linked closely with the Provisional IRA. Claims to apostolic descent from the original Sinn Féin make useful propaganda but they conflict with mundane historical evidence.

The party of the early twenty-first century differs fundamentally from that of the early twentieth. Yet when the republicans annexed the name Sinn Féin in the aftermath of the treaty split they began a process which would have a long, varied and turbulent life. The vicissitudes of Irish republicanism, and the triumphs and failures of the post-civil war Sinn Féin parties, continue to make a fascinating and revealing story.

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P R E F A C E

It was as a research student in University College, Dublin that I first became fascinated by the history of the Sinn Féin party. Desmond Williams supervised my MA dissertation, portions of which were to be cannibalised and absorbed into chapters 3 and 5 of this book. He was kindly, supportive, insightful, stimulating and frequently absent. From time to time during his legendary disappearances his place was taken by his learned and terrifying colleague, Robin Dudley Edwards. Dudley scrutinized all that I wrote with great care, fretted about my work and even dreamt about it. They were a colourful combination, and I cherish their memory.

After years abroad I returned to Dublin and to the subject of Sinn Féin. I researched intermittently on what ultimately became this book, deflected by work on two other books, by various articles, and by an infinite number of other less productive distractions. It grew; the time span to be covered doubled; new sources became available; and I developed different ways of looking at the period and its problems. The book has been many years in the making, and if its appearance is long overdue it can at least benefit from the vast literature which has appeared in the course of recent years.

It is a lengthy work, and unapologetically so. The subject of the Irish revolution has provoked numerous books, articles and dissertations, but its political aspects have remained underexplored. *The resurrection of Ireland* is an attempt to right this imbalance, to examine in some depth the complex and often difficult interaction between military and civilian manifestations of a moderate and almost ‘accidental revolution’; a revolution which depended on freak circumstances for its initial impetus and which was reined in, at least in part, by an organized expression of mass civilian opinion. Political developments are also examined in their own right, independently of their links with soldiers and warfare. One of my aims has been to understand, describe and explain what it was *like* to be a supporter of Sinn Féin in the years after the Easter Rising.

The Sinn Féin party navigated the Irish democratic tradition through the squalls and storms of a military revolution. It helped ensure that, at the end of

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the day, the army was subordinated to civilian authority. This democratic triumph was one of Sinn Féin's greatest achievements. The party helped win over and marginalize the radicals, the 'real' (and unrepresentative) revolutionaries. It was often ignored and disparaged, but it was always present, either in the foreground or as a background influence. It could always be exploited or annexed by the more moderate or realistic of the revolutionaries. At the most basic and negative level, Sinn Féin provided an important element of continuity between the Irish Parliamentary Party, which it supplanted, and its own successor parties of Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Above all else this is a *story* of a party, a movement, a mood, a group of often fascinating individuals, and a complex series of relationships.

It is a pleasure to acknowledge at least some of the many debts which I incurred in writing the book. The first and most basic of all, to my mother and father, goes back long before my present preoccupation with the political aspects of the Irish revolution. They encouraged my interest in history, which began in my early childhood and which was stimulated by dedicated reading of comics with titles such as *To sweep the Spanish Main* and *In the reign of terror* – works which left me impatient to begin studying the past as one of my subjects in school. Later my parents supported my wish to pursue historical research, even though they worried about where it would lead and what would become of me.

More recently, as this book was nearing its close, friends and colleagues have read and commented on one of the later drafts. I am most grateful to Ciaran Brady, Tom Garvin, Patrick Lynch, Agnès Maillot and Cormac Ó Gráda for their generosity with their time, for the advice they offered and for the corrections which they made. In some cases, doubtless unwisely, I did not follow their suggestions, so they cannot be blamed for the errors or infelicities which remain. I am also indebted to Sheila Kane, who in copy-editing this book has displayed both a meticulous attention to detail and an exemplary patience with my failings.

Others have assisted me in different ways. As always, Ruth Dudley Edwards provided lively and generous hospitality. Many people have made helpful comments or have drawn my attention to useful sources, among them Gary Agnew, Cathal Brugha, John Coakley (who suggested the book's title), Marie Coleman, Seán Collins, Mary E. Daly, Pauric Dempsey, Tom Dunne, Colm Gallagher, Keiko Inoue, Lar Joye, Jim McGuinness, Patrick Maume, Risteárd Mulcahy, Brian S. Murphy, the late Thomas P. O'Neill, Timothy P. O'Neill, Paul Rouse, Mary Ruane, Richard Sinnott and Pauric Travers. Like all historians I have depended on the efficiency and goodwill of archivists, and I am indebted to Aideen Ireland of the National Archives, Peter Young and Victor Laing of the

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Military Archives, David Sheehy of the Dublin Diocesan Archive, Fr John Gates of the Armagh Diocesan Archive, Breandán MacGiolla Choille and Fr Ignatius of the Franciscan Archive (for access to the de Valera papers when they were in Killiney), Colette O'Daly of the National Library, Philip Hannon of Fianna Fáil; and, in particular, to Seamus Helferty of the UCD Archives Department and Patricia McCarthy of the Cork Archives Institute.

I am also grateful to the many students in University College, Dublin who, over the years, have attended my lecture courses on the history of the Irish Revolution. I have been stimulated by some of the questions which they raised in tutorial discussions, and (although they might be surprised to learn of it) also by some of the arguments in essays which they wrote. None the less I needed to escape from them, and the publication of *The resurrection of Ireland* would have been delayed even further had I not been able to exploit periods of study leave. Parts of these were spent with my file cards and computer in the distraction-free environments of Rasteau (Vaucluse) and Pontaubert (Yonne).

The book is dedicated, with great affection, to my nephews – and not merely because, years ago, they demanded that it should be.

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

Contemporary custom is followed in referring occasionally to the Irish Parliamentary Party as ‘the Irish Party’ or even simply as ‘the party’. The words ‘Nationalist’ and ‘Unionist’, beginning with capital letters, refer to the two political parties; in lower case ‘nationalists’ and ‘unionists’ refer more generally to communities, movements or traditions. Unless the context clearly indicates otherwise, ‘treaty’ refers to the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The term ‘treatyite’ is used as a synonym for a supporter of this agreement, but sparingly because it is awkward and ugly. The words ‘club’ and ‘branch’ are used interchangeably. The English rather than the Irish form of names is normally used, as was the pattern at the time covered by this book, and a few short passages have been translated into English from Irish and French.

Errors of spelling and grammar within quotations have been corrected silently, and the text has not been spattered with condescending (*sic*)s. It is impossible to be consistent in using the acute accent (or ‘síne fada’) when citing the name ‘Sinn Féin’ in direct quotations; in general the accent has been used when quoting friendly but not hostile sources. This conforms to normal usage and intention (supporters being generally anxious to spell it correctly, and opponents being less concerned about the matter), but exceptions are inevitable.

The de Valera papers (UCDA, P150) are being re-classified as this book goes to press. ‘Old’ notations have been removed, and the least unsatisfactory form of citation is probably to give a brief description of the document (e.g., ‘de Valera to Collins’), and the date.

ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Armagh diocesan archives
AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
AW	Archbishop Walsh MSS, Dublin diocesan archives
BL	Andrew Bonar Law MSS, House of Lords Record Office
Cab.	Cabinet papers, Public Record Office, London
CAI	Cork Archives Institute
CI	County inspector, Royal Irish Constabulary
CO	Colonial Office files, Public Record Office, London
CP	Count Plunkett MSS, National Library of Ireland
DE	Dáil Éireann
DE, 1919–21	<i>Dáil Éireann. Minutes of proceedings of the first parliament of the Republic of Ireland 1919–1921</i>
DE, 1921–22	<i>Dáil Éireann. Tuairisc oifigiúil [official report] for periods 16th August, 1921, to 26th August, 1921, and 28th February, 1922, to 8th June, 1922</i>
DE, official report	Dáil debates, September 1922 –
DE, private sessions	<i>Dáil Éireann. private sessions of second Dáil: minutes of proceedings 18 August 1921 to 14 September 1921 and report of debates 14 December 1921 to 6 January 1922</i>
DE, treaty debate	<i>Iris Dháil Éireann: Official report. Debate on the Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland signed in London on the 6th December, 1921</i>

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DELG	Dáil Éireann Local Government Department files, National Archives of Ireland
EdeV	Eamon de Valera MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department
EO'M	Ernie O'Malley MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department
FG	Fine Gael MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department, P/39/Min/1
<i>FJ</i>	<i>Freeman's Journal</i>
FO'D	Florence O'Donoghue MSS, National Library of Ireland
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GD	George Gavan Duffy MSS, National Library of Ireland
GHQ	General headquarters
GPO	General Post Office, Dublin
<i>Hansard</i>	Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 5th series
HC:DD	<i>High Court of Justice, 1942: documents discovered by plaintiff and briefed to counsel on behalf of defendant Charles Stewart Wyse Power</i> (Dublin, 1944)
HHa	H. H. Asquith MSS, Bodleian Library, Oxford
HSS	Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington MSS, National Library of Ireland
IG	Inspector general, Royal Irish Constabulary
<i>IHS</i>	<i>Irish Historical Studies</i>
<i>II</i>	<i>Irish Independent</i>
IMA	Irish Military Archives
IO's report (M. and C./N./S.)	[British Army] Intelligence officer's report, Midland and Connaught/Northern/Southern district, Public Record Office, London, CO.904/157/1
IRA	Irish Republican Army

IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
<i>IT</i>	<i>Irish Times</i>
JD	John Dillon MSS, Trinity College Dublin Library
JR	John Redmond MSS, National Library of Ireland
JO'M	James O'Mara MSS, National Library of Ireland
LG	David Lloyd George MSS, House of Lords Record Office
MacN	Eoin MacNeill MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department
MacS	Mary MacSwiney MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department
McG	Joe McGarrity MSS, National Library of Ireland
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NLI	National Library of Ireland
PG	Provisional government
PR	Proportional representation
PRO	Public Record Office, London
RB	Robert Barton MSS, National Library of Ireland
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
RM	Richard Mulcahy MSS, University College, Dublin, Archives Department
SCM	Sinn Féin standing committee minutes, National Library of Ireland, P3269
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labour Party
SFFC	Sinn Féin funds case, National Archives of Ireland
STO'K	Seán T. O'Kelly MSS, National Library of Ireland
TCDL	Trinity College, Dublin, Library
UCDA	University College, Dublin, Archives Department
UIL	United Irish League